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SUBJECT: RRT ERBIL: FRENCH FM KOUCHNER OPENS DIPLOMATIC
OFFICE, HIGHLIGHTS KURDISH ACHIEVEMENTS

REF: BAGHDAD 1676

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[1](#)1. (U) This is an Erbil Regional Reconstruction Team Message.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Summary: During a well-choreographed June 1 visit to Erbil, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner held talks with Kurdistan Regional government (KRG) Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and President Massoud Barzani, led the flag-raising ceremony to inaugurate the French Diplomatic Office, and held a press conference with President Barzani. Kouchner highlighted his long and enduring friendship with the Kurds, praised them as "pioneers" several times, and encouraged them to embrace their role as models for the rest of Iraq. He said the French office in Erbil would soon be upgraded to a consulate, and announced the establishment of a French cultural center. Kouchner noted he looked forward to the UN announcement on Article 140, and said resolving the Kirkuk question is key to Iraq's democratic development. End Summary.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner presided over the opening of France's new diplomatic office in Erbil. Freshly painted and gleaming in the sun, the office is located in the center of Erbil, with an excellent view of the Erbil Citadel. The Director is Frederic Tissot, a friend of Kouchner's, and also a founding member of Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). The French will open a new cultural center next door. Dr. Tissot told RRTOff June 3 that he is developing plans for an assistance program in the Kurdistan Region, with activities focused at the new cultural center. Tissot added that the existing Arthur Rimbaud Cultural Center, located at the Citadel, receives approximately 20,000 Euro per year from the French government.

[1](#)4. (U) In his speech to foreign diplomatic representatives and KRG officials, Kouchner repeated three times that the office would become a consulate, and very soon. He emphasized his close ties with the Barzani family, and his time spent with Mustapha Barzani, whom he first met in 1974. He lauded the Kurds as "pioneers" who have demonstrated what the rest of Iraq can become as the security situation improves. Kurds must serve as an example, he said, by further building up their democratic institutions, such as their parliament, and through their support for human rights. He also urged Kurds to hold their elected leaders accountable and to insist on the development of a truly independent press in the region. KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani praised Kouchner for his strong support for the Kurds, noting that in 1991 MSF (founded by Kouchner) was one of the Kurds' few true friends, helping to save many lives.

Kouchner and President Barzani press conference

¶15. (U) Although the press conference yielded mostly softball questions, Kouchner noted that he had waited ten years for this moment, and expressed happiness over the positive change in French foreign policy toward Iraq. He again brought up his personal relationship with Barzani's, but also highlighted the importance of the two Kurdish leaders, previously adversaries, serving as Presidents in Iraq. In response to a question on Article 140, Kouchner said he believes the United Nations proposal will be interesting, and said France will support the UN recommendations if they provide a solution, as resolving Kirkuk remains key to Iraq's democratic development. He also said he supported the position provided by President Barzani. (Note: In response to an earlier question on Kirkuk, Barzani responded that the Kurds are open to discussion on the subject, and that the UN's involvement can help resolve the problem. End Note.) When asked if France follows U.S. and UK policy, Kouchner responded that he does not comment on other countries policies.

French business delegation in tow

¶16. (SBU) Kouchner was accompanied by a French business delegation, led by Jean-Marie Bellat, French Commercial Affairs Officer for Iraq, based in Amman, Jordan. Mr. Bellat and representatives from French companies Gregoire Besson, Berthoud, Richel, Societe du Canal du Provence et d'Amenagement de la Region Provencale (SCP), and Manitou met June 3 with the RRT's Senior Economic Advisor to discuss the KRG investment climate. According to Bellat, the business delegation accompanied Kouchner to conduct initial due

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diligence for investment opportunities in Iraq. He also noted that France's initial involvement would be the forgiveness of defaulted debt obligations and support to private sector development.

Foreign Representation in Erbil

¶17. (U) Thirteen official foreign representation offices are in Erbil, including the RRT and the United Nations. There are two consulates: Iran and Russia; three Embassy Offices: France, Germany, and UK; and five honorary consuls: Austria, Czech Republic, Italy, Korea, Netherlands, and Spain.

¶18. (U) Embassy Baghdad note: Kouchner's stop in Erbil capped off a two-day visit to Iraq that began May 31 in Nasiriyah, in the company of VP Adil Abd Al-Mahdi, and included an overnight stop in Baghdad, where he met with CG Petraeus and Ambassador Satterfield (Reftel), President Talabani, PM Maliki, CoR Speaker Mashadani, FM Zebari, and Chaldean Patriarch Cardinal Delly, while also visiting the Al-Bitar hospital in Baghdad.

¶19. (U) Biographical Note: Dr. Frederic Tissot, whose own long association with the Kurds included overseeing a GoF resettlement program in 1989, is confined to a wheelchair since a 2006 accident in Haiti.

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